

Apologies to the shade of Douglas Adams, from whom characters (and towels) of the Hitchhiker universe are visiting. Otherwise, Paramount claims all things Trekish; A. Decker writes of ideas Trakish; I just pen BorgSpace.

Shades of Gray: The Saga of Watching Paint Dry

Somewhere in the multiverses:

"Make me a Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster. It has been one of those centuries."

"Me...with a brain as big the size of the universe, thinking thoughts you can't even begin to comprehend...."

"Can it, Paranoid Android. I just want my drink. My heads are killing me!"

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A sunny room, window open to the warm afternoon air, blowing diaphanous white curtains inward on a salt breeze. One corner, an easel, figure behind it madly painting dabs of gray-blue, capturing the essence of a stormy sea battering at a pitifully small lifeboat and single occupant.

"Dear," came an unseen voice, female, "the engagement is only an hour away, and you know it takes twenty minutes to get there by car. You really should get ready."

"Don't bother me!" The painter added another swirl of foreboding doom to the churning clouds.

"It /is/ your showing, you know."

"Then they will just have to wait for me, the guest of honor! Creation of the sights my patrons adore is not a matter of deadlines! When the inspiration strikes...." A wave curled as deft brush strokes were added, appearing to rise up hungrily to swamp the raft.

"Honey...."

The painter was in a personal rage, his emotions transferring themselves to canvas, enhancing the power of the masterpiece in progress. "Why does my work claim such high prices? Why am I the foremost artist of the century...and /before/ I've died, mind you? Because of passion! Because of dedication! I /make/ my own paints, mix the pigments just so, prepare the canvas as per the old traditions. It is through blood, sweat, tears the pictures flow...the critics and patrons can bloody well wait half an hour or so."

A patient sigh, as if the outburst was not a new thing. "Very well. I'll finish getting ready, then call the gallery to tell them we will be a bit delayed."

"Yes," answered the painter, already immersed in the gloomy prophesy of doom taking final shape beneath his lithe brush.

Assimilation rose out of the memory, a treasure locked deep in his psyche, one of the few which had not been surrendered to the Greater Consciousness. So much of a prior life dismissed as irrelevant, except for those few nuggets buried deeply, like a gnarled tree with ancient roots drilled in rock. Assimilation prodded the memory again, like he might have once poked a painful tooth or picked at a scab, savoring every nuance.

He had once been great! A mixer of paints, a mixer of dreams! He could stir the most brilliant of vermilions, then sift in flecks of pure silver just so...allowing a painted gown to truly sparkle. An old method, visceral, was oil on canvas...of ancient lineage when compared to the

modern light sculptures, yet much more powerful to the senses.

Now 13 of 20, Assimilation, was a mixer of nanites, constructor of prosthetics. What a let down...no wonder he was bored...no wonder he was always depressed. He accessed another golden memory.

The Collective had attempted in the past, and still tried, to determine the one common denominator of assimilation imperfection. There was no specific gender or racial type or civilization which was more likely to produce an imperfect drone; of course, the low numbers which occurred in comparison to the numbers of sophonts assimilated meant the sample pool was very small. Still, if the Collective had bothered to closely examine 13 of 20 of Exploratory-class Cube #347 before his introduction to Borg life, at least one basis might have been found. Whereas other imperfect drones had the deciding factor obscured by a complex facet of personality overlays, the reoccurring theme was strong in a certain painter of species #5252: a total and absolute belief that the universe revolves around oneself. Not even the Borg can completely shatter certain self-delusions.

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"You call this a Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster? It's curdled!"

"I was just trying to explain to the worm in the bottle about...."

"You sobered the thing up long enough for it to suicide, didn't you?"

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The sand was gritty under the figure's feet, cold waves of winter lapping sedately on the white shores. The winter storms would come soon, bringing the wailing howls of wind and gusts of salt-laden spray. Until then, with the passing of autumn, all of nature was holding its breath, waiting...waiting....

It was times like these the painter looked forward to for his inspiration. The crowds of summer gone, even the birds flown but for one or two black-hooded sentinels. A halfway time, caught between ticks of the world's clock. The artist was alone on his trek; the chattering voices of the modern world would ruin the solitary hunt for enlightenment.

The air-borne whining, when it was heard, was annoying, sending the few birds flying skyward. The painter turned, frown on his face, expecting to see a hovercar of admirers taking illicit photographs; or perhaps an aircraft that had missed the spaceport twenty kilometers down the coast and was only now managing to make a turn to reapproach the runway. Both had happened before, although generally not when he was stretching his legs in a pre-breakfast hike.

The artist only had a few seconds to dodge the incoming shuttlecraft, one nacelle dark, as it tried to make an emergency landing on the open beach. He was not successful.

Assimilation mixed paint. It was gray. To Assimilation's senses, everything was gray. After the accident from which he had miraculously survived unscathed but for a broken leg, the color had leached out of his world. "Brain damage," the doctors had said, "affecting the areas which perceive color. We are sorry, but there is nothing we can do." The end result had been an artist, known for his subtle use of hue and shading, reduced to a world of monochromatic blah.

The paint was brushed on the bulkhead, near an alcove (empty) meant for processing the newly assimilated. Assimilation decided the gray was a cold variation, subtly accenting the

warmer shade that had been applied earlier.

In despair, the lost artist, who would become 13 of 20, fled to the stars, seeking out the Borg. He had heard the machines could cure his particular blindness, make him whole. Of course there was the little problem of the payment the Borg would exact, but...but the world would be full of colors once again.

The Borg took the insane member of species #5252 which sought them out, but the damage inflicted in the shuttle crash was too old to fix. And as color vision was not a priority for usefulness, 13 of 20 woke to the Collective to find the world retained its a gray quality.

There were many shades of gray. Warm grays, frigid grays, violent grays, peaceful grays...but they were all gray. A depressing color on a cube which was rarely allowed to process sentiments. Assimilation was reduced to watching his latest creation slowly dry.

Assimilation sighed; his hierarchy sighed, tuned as they were to their head's mental state.

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Here is what the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy has to say about the Borg:

Borg: Mega type-A personality

The Guide goes on to say that not much is truly known about the Borg, mostly because researchers appointed to the subject tend not to return from fact-finding assignments. However, as the Borg are confined to a minimum of multiverse possibilities, the here-and-now of the current reality have no reason to worry. It should also be noted that when scientists were first trying out the Infinite Improbability Drive, a future copy of the Guide was found in which all sentient races had been replaced with numerical designations, and star systems with attendant planets were long strings of letters and numbers.

The editors at the time of the most recent publishing of the Guide did not comment, beyond saying the future was a highly fluid medium. For the most part, the same editors were too busy packing their towels, changing the batteries in portable Someone Else's Problem Field generators, and slipping on Peril Sensitive Sunglasses - it seemed a long vacation was in the works.

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"What are you doing?" asked a female voice. "You never bothered to learn how to operate that properly."

"I stole this ship in the first place. Of course I can work it!" A pair of yellow buttons were depressed, followed by a red one.

From the bowels of the ship: "AAAHHHH! The toilets are overflowing again!"

"Well, maybe there are a few things I have trouble with."

A sigh from the first voice, then, "What were you trying to do, anyway?"

"No one here can make a proper Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster. Marvin's the best, when he doesn't cause the glass to melt with depression. Ford's passable; and the monkey-boy I won't let near the alcohol."

"And me?"

"Well...it's a guy thing, you see. Anyway, I thought if I could give the drive a whirl, I

might be able to pick up a decent bartender. Or at least something who was a better conversationalist than the Paranoid Android."

"Then let me do it. I have a better chance of keeping us in one piece, more or less."

Pause. "Fine."

"Eddie! Wake up!" The sound of typing on a ship console commenced.

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The paint slowly dried in the humid environment of the cube. Somewhere beyond the bounds of the hull a fantastic nebula displayed its natural splendor, but it was unimportant to Assimilation. Oh, he knew what was happening, one could not block out such knowledge, but purples and reds were not relevant to a brain that only perceived grays.

Perhaps a bit more of gray variation #173? A fuzzy gray, bridging the sharp edge between warm and cold...it would have to serve. Assimilation uploaded the mixing instructions from his personal archives, then replicated the appropriate ingredients before beaming them directly to Assimilation Workshop #7.

Just as Assimilation was about to pour a smidgen of gray variation #2 into basic gray #20, he spontaneously disappeared. The container of gray variation #2 fell to the ground, splashing paint everywhere.

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In an ocean on an unimportant planet, a small fish suddenly materialized in a flash of bubbles. It looked around in resignation, not even trying to flee as a school of similar fish swept past, swimming for their lives from a very large predator. The last, and first, thought the small brain processed as tooth-studded jaws closed was "Oh no, not again."

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Assimilation materialized in a world fitting of Escher, clocks drooping over tree limbs and fence posts. A ticking, more akin to a beating heart, pulsated from every direction. The sun, also subtly melting, throbbed in time with the sound.

A voice from everywhere, yet nowhere: "Odds are seven hundred eighty-four million, four thousand, nine hundred ninety-eight to one against and falling." The distinct impression was female, and human at that, although there was no way to confirm. Suddenly Assimilation's world view altered.

The new world was equally strange, although in differing ways. A gigantic penguin with glasses waddled on a beach of freezing sand, sporting a shirt which read "Save the Androids". As Assimilation watched, the penguin fell apart, only to be reassembled as a waiter holding a plate of melting prawn tails.

"Odds are five hundred million, sixty-four thousand, three hundred twenty-nine to one against and falling," stated the feminine voice again.

The prawns exploded into a flare of (grey) technicolored light, complete with fireworks. As the pale smoke cleared, Assimilation found himself encased head to toe in cherry jello. Struggling was useless, as it only set the stuff to jiggling. "I say," said a nearby marshmallow, "just sit back and relax. It's all froody, unless a giant spoon is around." Assimilation struggled

harder.

"Odds are eight million, two hundred thirty-eight thousand, fifty-one against and falling. And stop giving the fellow a hard time."

The marshmallow rolled eyes it didn't have. The jello spontaneously dissolved, pouring away like water. A gigantic white dragon with sport-coat and pocket watch landed nearby, muttering something about being late before disappearing into a gold-lined cave. A flower shook itself, "Didn't we see that dragon before?" "Nonsense monkey-boy," replied a two-headed walrus, "it's just a figment of your unevolved imagination."

"Odds are nine hundred twenty-three thousand, nine hundred sixty-four to one against and falling."

The scene continued to change in bewildering manner, but a reoccurring theme was the presence of several bantering objects. The female voice continued to relate probabilities until:

"Odds are five to one against, two to one...normality. I repeat, we have achieved normality."

Normality was a obviously relative term.

Zaphod Beeblebrox had two heads, three arms, and dressed in a tasteless matter...which was apparent even in a world of gray hues. Both Trillian and Arthur Dent were human, but while the former was almost a perfect specimen of her species, the latter was unexcitingly normal. The last, Ford Prefect, was an average humanoid from the vicinity of Betelgeuse; he sported a peculiar satchel, out of which poked the corner of an old towel.

Assimilation was not only not in the Delta quadrant, he wasn't in his own reality. In fact, he didn't recognize the universe at all, other than the knowledge the Borg didn't exist here. That last realization, while uncomfortable, was not disastrous.

Zaphod led Assimilation down a maze of hallways and rooms, trailed by the other three "crew." Every time they went through a door, it would whoosh open and say something cheerful like "I open just for you!" It was highly annoying. After the forth repetition, Zaphod yelled at the door to shut up, then continued his conversation.

"So...you say you are a Borg, yes?"

"Yes, we are Borg." Assimilation had slipped into a plural mode, just in case word of this little side trip got back to the Public Relations department. "This drone is designated 13 of 20."

"Not an exciting name, but since I have no idea what a Borg is, I suppose it might be perfectly normal, like Graaaachyt. I think half the people I know back home are Graaaachyt. And do you have to continue talking like that?"

"Like what?"

"Never mind."

The group took an elevator to a lower deck, then passed through another smugly happy door. The room was fairly large, painted a bright white, and had a number of billiard tables and pub games scattered about. A dart board hung on one wall, surrounded by a myriad of small holes. Along the far side, running the length of the room, was a bar with all matter of bottles behind. "Here we go. Now, the important question is, can you mix drinks?"

"No."

Zaphod turned on head to glare at Trillian, who shrugged. Arthur was at the end of the bar, arguing with a small machine, and Ford had begun to toss darts, missing more often than scoring.

"Can you mix anything?"

Pride caused Assimilation to answer, "We can mix anything. It is our job on Cube #347, to mix nanites."

"Fine, fine. Then let me give you a quick tour."

A dart glanced off of the bar, sticking in Assimilation's body suit. Called Ford, "Oops! Sorry!"

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Marvin, robot, found himself sprawled on deck plates, one foot stuck in a can of gray paint. The air was warm and the humidity high - the perfect ingredients for a thick coat of rust. He did not know how he arrived on the strange ship, but it probably had something to do with the Heart of Gold and her Infinite Improbability Drive.

A sigh. It was now obvious where he was. It had taken a whole two seconds to process the available information...an eternity for a mind as large as his. The conjectures had been diverting for a microsecond or two, but in the end it was not enough.

Marvin picked himself off the deck, turning around until he spotted a data port. With an extended index finger he plugged his mind into the local computer, listening as the excited conjectures of hundreds of voices discussed where an individual by the name of Assimilation had suddenly disappeared.

Perhaps the Borg would be available for an entertaining and enlightening talk.

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Assimilation stood at the business side of the wet bar, looking at the wide variety of liquors from hundreds of planets. There were concoctions fermented not just from vegetable bases, but petroleum, animal, and in one case, the sweat of the recently extinct Quazzlecod Beast of Rillon IV. Zaphod was explaining how to mix a Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster.

"...and then you lightly swirl the ingredients together. Top it off with a paper umbrella and an olive, and the drink is complete. Of course the umbrella usually catches on fire and the olive dissolves, but hey, who am I to argue with genius."

Most of the bottles (and cans and jugs and very small jars) were labeled in a variety of languages, very few Assimilation recognized without the help of Collective files. He suspected that even if the other minds of Cube #347 were accessible, the words would continue to be unknowable. Other liquors had no labels at all.

"We don't understand."

"Go on...give it a whirl. Making a Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster is as simple as mixing clear, yellow, blue, and purple. You're supposed to be the best the multiverses have to offer, even if you've never made a drink in your existence, so, let's see some action!"

"This is the worst Blaster I have /ever/ tasted. The monkey-boy could do better!"

"Thank you, I think," said Arthur from a safe place at the other side of the room. He was sipping a cup of liquid almost, but not quite, entirely unlike tea.

Zaphod ignored Arthur's words as he advanced on Assimilation. "I told you exactly how to make this drink. For goodness sake, the proper bottles are even color-coded!"

Assimilation blinked. "There is one problem that we never informed you of, which is...." Interrupted Zaphod, "Problem? Why didn't you tell me there was a problem?"

"...which is this drone is color-blind."

Silence. "Color-blind?"

"Everything looks gray to us. This drone was once a premier painter, able to mix near one hundred separate shades of blue, but now all is quite monochromatic."

"Color-blind?" Zaphod seemed to be having trouble getting his minds around the concept. He abruptly turned and shouted, "EDDIE! TRILLIAN! I need to have a little talk with you two!"

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"...and then Zaphod one day had the nerve to tell me, a being with a mind vastly more complicated than his could ever be, that the band Mega-Death was the answer for my aches and pains. 'Clear you right out. Listened to it once when my sinuses were backed up, and next thing you know, after I woke up from the coma, I didn't have to worry about post-nasal drip anymore. Of course, the inside of my nostrils were cauterized, but no more mucus either.' Those were his exact words. I should know, as I have perfect memory as well.

"Speaking of perfect memory..." Marvin's monotone rendition suddenly halted as he disappeared as abruptly as he had arrived. A quick peek in Assimilation Workshop #7 would have revealed a can of paint on its side slowly rotating and several gray footprints.

Cube #347 didn't have the time for internal sensor sweeps: the sub-collective was too busy powering down the self-destruct mechanism. Consensus had indicated that was the only feasible solution to escape the deep, deep depression Marvin had levied on the cube.

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The gray paint slowly dried on its gray backdrop of bulkhead. Although Assimilation still had no clear reason for his abduction for those several very confusing hours, the hails upon his return to Cube #347 were nothing short of desperate mania. A short time after that, the typical boring routine of nothingness had set in with a vengeance.

It seemed the sub-collective had learned the difference between routine depression and suicidal impulse. Assimilation felt he had to meet this "Marvin" one day, a being which made drying paint look like a riotous day at the carnival.

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"Welcome back Marvin. Now make me a Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster, but don't melt the glass this time. Also, if you speak in plurals at any time, I shall be forced to dismantle you with a rusty screwdriver."